

Dirk Koppelberg and Stefan Tolksdorf (eds.): Erkenntnistheorie - Wie und wozu? [book review]

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Abstract:

To what end should or do we pursue philosophy and how? Meta-philosophical questions along these lines have gained more and more interest recently. The collected volume “Erkenntnistheorie—Wie und wozu?” (Engl.: “Epistemology—How and to what end?”) aspires to raise and tackle issues addressing the meta-epistemological questions “How is epistemology practiced and to what end?” (9). Although this aim sounds like a *descriptive* meta-epistemological endeavor, it is not surprising that many authors rather argue for *normative* claims surrounding the questions “How and to what end *should* epistemology be pursued?”. This review provides an overview on the collected volume and offers a critical evaluation of its overall achievement.

Keywords: book review | meta-philosophy | meta-epistemology | German-language books

Article:

Dirk Koppelberg and Stefan Tolksdorf (eds): Erkenntnistheorie—Wie und wozu?
Mentis, Münster 2015, 498 pp, €39.80, ISBN: 978-3-89785-348-5

To what end should or do we pursue philosophy and how? Meta-philosophical questions along these lines have gained more and more interest recently. The collected volume “Erkenntnistheorie—Wie und wozu?” (Engl.: “Epistemology—How and to what end?”) aspires to raise and tackle issues addressing the meta-epistemological questions “How is epistemology practiced and to what end?” (9). Although this aim sounds like a *descriptive* meta-epistemological endeavor, it is not surprising that many authors rather argue for *normative* claims surrounding the questions “How and to what end *should* epistemology be pursued?”. This review provides an overview on the collected volume and offers a critical evaluation of its overall achievement.

The editors Dirk Koppelberg and Stefan Tolksdorf compiled 13 new articles in German and supplemented them by a translated article by Joshua Shephard and Michael Bishop as well as translations of three articles by John Greco, Duncan Pritchard, and Ernest Sosa, respectively, which have already been published elsewhere. The volume is structured into seven parts. The *first* part “Einleitung: Warum Metaerkenntnistheorie?” (Engl.: “Introduction: Why meta-epistemology?”) contains a single piece: a general introduction by the editors summarizing every article of the volume in a rather detailed way. It provides a good overview of the content of the book and is thus highly recommended to all readers—independent of how selectively the volume is intended to be read. Apart from taking stock of current and past epistemological debates, the three articles of the *second* part “Perspektiven der Erkenntnistheorie” (Engl.: “Epistemology’s perspectives”) already address the question of how epistemology should be pursued in the future. Ansgar Beckermann pleads for giving up the endeavor of analyzing the concept of knowledge and instead advocates focusing on truth criteria and reliable methods for acquiring beliefs (“Erkenntnistheorie ohne Wissensbegriff”, Engl.: “Epistemology without the concept of knowledge”). Koppelberg argues against the former claim and suggests supplementing the endeavor with (epistemic) value oriented questions (“Brauchen wir eine neue Agenda für die Erkenntnistheorie?”, Engl.: “Do we need a new agenda for epistemology?”). The third contributor of this part, Tolksdorf, does not offer a third stance on that topic, but argues for disjunctivist accounts of justification (“Erkenntnistheorie aus disjunktivistischer Perspektive”, Engl.: “Epistemology from a disjunctivist point of view”). From a reader’s perspective, it is somewhat surprising that this first part is not placed last, because the following parts proceed from taking a look at more traditional epistemology to alternative approaches, and then to new approaches and to further claims for re-orienting epistemological research. More specifically, the *third* part “Methodologie der Erkenntnistheorie (I): Spielarten der Begriffsanalyse” (Engl.: “Methodology of epistemology (I): Varieties of conceptual analysis”) deals in four articles with issues surrounding conceptual analysis and their application to one of the central topics in epistemology: the analysis of knowledge. Peter Baumann makes the case for a more moderate aim of conceptual analysis, namely to (merely) identify necessary conditions (“Begriffe analysieren?”, Engl.: “Analyzing concepts?”). Pritchard’s aim is twofold: He first argues that the common picture of epistemology is too simplistic; epistemologists base their work on different kinds of intuitions of unequal weight. He then argues that—thus understood – some anti-armchair objections are misguided (“Die Methodologie der Erkenntnistheorie”, Engl.: “The methodology of epistemology”). Gerhard Ernst defends conceptual analysis as a methodological tool for epistemology, but he provides reasons to favor a variant which focus on considering common cases instead of extraordinary cases (“Beispiele in der Erkenntnistheorie”, Engl.: “Examples in epistemology”). The final contribution of this part by Sven Bernecker does not add a further stance on conceptual analysis, but a new proposal on how to define the notion of knowledge. He argues that it is crucial to add a condition stating that the state of affairs corresponding to one’s justificatory reasons has to be in a specific relation to the state of affairs which are the truth makers of the proposition at hand (“Die identifikationistische Lösung des Gettierproblems”, Engl.: “The identificatory solution to the Gettier problem”). Approaches that are more empirical in nature are treated in the *fourth* part “Methodologie der Erkenntnistheorie (II): Spielarten des Naturalismus” (Engl.: “Methodology of epistemology (II): Varieties of naturalism”), which addresses in four articles naturalism in epistemology and the recently evolved so-called experimental philosophy. Markus Wild argues that knowledge is an epistemic state which is shared by humans and other animals. Instances of knowledge are instances of

specifically qualified representations (“Wer den Pavian versteht ...”, Engl. “Who understands the baboon ...”). Shephard and Bishop argue against radical armchair epistemology and radical naturalized epistemology and plead for a moderate naturalized epistemology in which both intuitions and scientific evidence play a central role (“Argumente für die naturalisierte Erkenntnistheorie”, Engl.: “The case for naturalized epistemology”). Koppelberg is concerned with experimental epistemology and presents his so-called cooperative naturalized epistemology, which is a specification of Shephard and Bishop’s general account (“Wozu experimentelle Erkenntnistheorie?”, Engl.: “To what end should we pursue experimental epistemology?”). While Shephard, Bishop, and Koppelberg aim at uniting experimental philosophy and armchair philosophy’s focus on intuitions, Joachim Horvath defends the latter by arguing that experimental philosophy does not pose a genuine challenge for armchair philosophy on closer inspection (“Was ist eigentlich die Herausforderung durch die Experimentelle Philosophie?”, Engl.: “What challenge does experimental philosophy actually pose?”). Another more recent approach, namely virtue epistemology, is of focal interest of the three articles of the *fifth* part “Neuorientierung der Erkenntnistheorie (I): Tugenderkenntnistheorie” (Engl.: “Re-orientation of epistemology (I): Virtue epistemology”). Sosa offers a further defense of armchair philosophy focusing on epistemology. Inter alia, he claims that genuine dissents among philosophers would be a crucial challenge for armchair philosophy, but argues that experimental philosophy does not reveal such dissents (“Kann es Philosophie als Disziplin geben? Und kann sie auf Intuitionen gegründet werden?”, Engl.: “Can there be a discipline of philosophy? And can it be founded on intuition?”). Greco presents and defends his virtue epistemology account of knowledge, in which abilities play a crucial role for acquiring knowledge (“Wissen und auf Fähigkeiten beruhender Erfolg”, Engl. “Knowledge and success resulting from abilities”). Tolksdorf concludes this part by continuing his plea for disjunctivist accounts of justification. He criticizes Sosa’s virtue epistemology account by arguing that it can only be successful if Sosa gives up his fallibilist account of manifesting epistemic virtues and employs a non-fallibilist account instead (“Tugenderkenntnistheorie, Wissen und epistemischer Zufall—Ein Argument gegen nicht-disjunktivistische Tugenderkenntnistheorien des Wissens”, Engl.: “Virtue epistemology, knowledge and epistemic luck—An argument against non-disjunctivist virtue theories of knowledge”). The *sixth* part “Neuorientierung der Erkenntnistheorie (II): Wissensforschung” (Engl.: “Re-orientation of epistemology (II): Studies of knowledge”) consists of two proposals to substantially broaden epistemology to take into consideration the various forms of knowledge and their acquisition. By pointing out that the different forms of knowledge are interrelated, Günter Abel argues that epistemologists’ focus on knowledge-that is too narrow and needs to be broadened. As a start he offers a detailed taxonomy of knowledge (“Wissensforschung—Erweiterungen und Revisionen der Epistemologie”, Engl.: “Studies of knowledge—Extensions and revisions of epistemology”). Martina Plümacher, the volume’s only female contributor, emphasizes that human knowledge is inherently perspectival by virtue of being necessarily selective. She then outlines the implication of this thesis for how to conduct epistemological research in a fruitful way and examines the relation between this perspectivalism and contextualism (“Erkenntnisperspektiven und ihre Kontexte”, Engl.: “Perspectives of knowledge and their contexts”). The book ends how it started: with a single piece constituting the *seventh* part “Schluss: Dissense in der Erkenntnistheorie” (Engl.: “Conclusion: Disagreement in epistemology”). This conclusion, written by Thomas Grundmann, is devoted to disagreements in philosophy. He argues that stable dissents are due to epistemic equality of the involved parties and that they require us to refrain from judgment. He then tries to show that many dissents in

philosophy turn out to be non-stable, because equality of parties is not given (“Die Epistemologie stabiler Dissense in der Philosophie”, Engl.: “The epistemology of stable dissents in philosophy”).

That the volume is rich in content and offers new perspectives is beyond doubt. I focus my evaluation on its overall achievement regarding its meta-epistemological approach. In their introduction, Koppelberg and Tolksdorf claim that meta-epistemology is a new topic in philosophical debates and that their volume addresses the most important stances taken so far (9). Compared to classical companions to epistemology, the volume at hand is indeed unique in having meta-epistemological issues as its core theme. However, the claim that the volume offers something new needs to be qualified in at least two respects. *First of all*, the book is not meta-epistemology all the way down. Even though many of the collected articles focus on descriptive or normative meta-epistemological questions, some also deal with typical (non-meta-)epistemological questions, such as Tolksdorf’s plea for disjunctivism, Bernecker’s proposal of how to solve the Gettier problem, Wild’s analysis of knowledge, and Greco’s virtue epistemology account. This is not say that these papers do not make valuable contributions to their respective debates, but the general introduction does not render it crystal clear why these spots have not been filled by meta-epistemological articles or by articles which focus on the meta-epistemological implications of such accounts. *Secondly*, some of the articles dealing with meta-issues address philosophy in general rather than epistemology in particular, such as Baumann’s stance on analyzing concepts, Horvath’s evaluation of experimental philosophy, as well as Grundmann’s analysis of dissents in philosophy. Such papers would better fit into volumes on meta-philosophy, such as the recently published “The Palgrave handbook of philosophical methods” (Daly 2015). Again, pointing this out does not aim at diminishing the respective authors’ contributions. However, one expects a collection on meta-epistemology to focus exclusively on meta-epistemological issues, be it by analyzing the peculiarities of epistemology or by applying meta-philosophical stances on epistemology, such as Ernst’s discussion of the role of examples for epistemological research, Koppelberg’s stance on experimental epistemology, and Sosa’s defense of armchair epistemology.

The claim that the book addresses the most important stances taken so far requires qualification as well. At least three topics have been left out: *Formal* epistemology as an alternative to traditional epistemology (e.g., Bovens and Hartmann 2003; Huber and Schmidt-Petri 2009; Spohn 2012), the *explication* of epistemological terms as an alternative to conceptual analysis (e.g., Craig 1990; Brendel 2013; Olsson 2015), and the recent development of pursuing *reductionist* claims in epistemology, such as approaches to reduce all pieces of knowledge to knowledge-that (e.g., Stanley and Williamson 2001; Brogaard 2009) or reducing instances of understanding to corresponding instances of knowledge (e.g., Grimm 2006; Kelp 2014; Sliwa 2015). Concerning the limits of the book, one should also note that epistemologists’ recent turn to other epistemic states, such as the current debate about understanding (e.g., Kvanvig 2003; Elgin 2007; Greco 2014; Hills 2015), gets only little attention.

That these topics are not addressed in the volume does not render the latter’s scope small, though. The volume is comprehensive, tackles many central issues, and paves the ground for fruitful meta-epistemological debates in the future. It is thus definitely worth studying. Hence, it seems a pity that the collection will not be easily accessible to non-German speakers.

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